DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 078 CG 019 967

AUTHOR Bianchi, Lisa Gabardi; And Others
TITLE The Effects of Divorce on College Students.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (Albuquerque, NM, April 30-May 2, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; College Students; *Depression (Psychology); *Divorce; Higher Education; Marriage; *Parent Influence; *Sex Differences; Student Attitudes; *Young Adults

ABSTRACT

Statistics demonstrate that parental divorce is a compelling social issue affecting a large number of children. While investigations of the effects of divorce on children have grown rapidly in the last decade, there is a paucity of research on the effects of divorce on older adolescents and young adults. Given the developmental importance of identity and intimacy issues for the older adolescent and young adult, it would seem that the divorce of their parents would have a significant impact on their own development. A study was conducted to examine the effects of divorce on college students (N=500) on measures of depression, self-esteem, sexual behavior, attitudes about marriage, and general psychological functioning. The study compared students from intact and divorced families, and made specific comparisons across sex of the student and number of years since the parents' divorce. The results indicated that men with divorced parents experienced more depression than did women with divorced parents. For women, but not for men, those who had experienced a parental divorce within the past year showed more expressiveness than did those who had experienced a parental divorce more than one year ago. The hypotheses that college students from divorced families would have more negative attitudes toward marriage and that college women with divorced parents would exhibit sexual acting out were not supported. A five-page list of references is provided. (NB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED283078

The Effects of Divorce on College Students

Lisa Gabardi Bianchi, Lee A. Rosén, and Nora P. Reilly

(Colorado State University)

A paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association

Albuquerque, New Mexico April 1987

RUNNING HEAD: Divorce

CG 019967

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lisa Gabardi Bianchi

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Effects of Divorce on College Students

Lisa Gabardi Bianchi, Lee A. Rosén, Nora P. Reilly

Recent statistics indicate that over 8 million children live in divorced or separated households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). If current divorce rates continue, up to one half of all children living in the United States will experience living in a fatherless family before they reach the age of eighteen (Thornton & Freedman, 1983). These statistics demonstrate that divorce is a compelling social issue affecting a large portion of our children. While investigations of the effects of divorce on children have grown rapidly in the past decade, there is a paucity of research on the effects of divorce on older adolescents and young adults. Given the developmental importance of identity and intimacy issues for the older adolescent and young adult, it would seem that the divorce of their parents (their primary role models for intimate relationships) would have a significant impact on their own development (Erikson, 1968).

The present study examined the effects of divorce on college students on measures of depression, self-esteem, sexual behavior, attitudes about marriage, and general psychological functioning. The study compared students from intact and divorced families, as well as making specific comparisons across sex of the student and number of years since the parents' divorce. An attempt was made to establish (a) a significant relationship between students of divorce and depression, sexual promiscuity, low self-esteem, negative attitudes about marriage, and poor psychological functioning, (b) significant sex differences among students of divorce, and (c) significant differences across dependent measures by number of years since the student has experienced parental divorce, such that students from families divorced one year or less experience significantly more

maladjustment than students from families that have been divorced for more than one year.

Subjects were 500 college students at Colorado State University currently enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Paper and pencil questionnaires were randomly ordered in packets and group administered to students consenting to participate in the study. Measures included a Demographic Data Sheet, an Attitudes Toward Marriage Survey, a Sexuality Inventory, the Psychological Screening Inventory (PSI; Lanyon, 1968), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Moch, & Erbauch, 1961). Data were collected and are currently being analyzed.

The Effects of Divorce on College Students

Divorce is a complex psychological, familial, and social process that can only be understood in terms of many interrelated factors. Researchers have found that children react in multiple ways to the divorce of their parents depending upon the child's age, sex, pre-divorce parental relationship, and number of years since the divorce (Anthony, 1974; Hetherington, 1979, 1982; Schoettle & Cantwell, 1980) . While the effects of divorce on children have been studied by several investigators, there is a lack of research on the effects of divorce on older adolescents and young adults. Perhaps there is an assumption that these groups have adequate social supports and are developmentally capable of successfully dealing with their parents' divorce. Unfortunately, this assumption has not been empirically validated. Given the developmental importance of identity and intimacy issues for this population, it would seem that parental divorce would have a significant impact on intimacy development for the young adult (Erikson, 1968).

Research indicates that children respond to the divorce of their parents differently across age groups. Pre-school children are cognitively unable to understand the loss of one parent and typically feel guilt over responsibility for the divorce (Rohrlich, Berg-Cross, & Berg-Cross, 1977). These children may regress, show disturbance in play and fantasies, as well as exhibit new anxieties and tantrums (Rohrlich et al., 1977). School age children have the cognitive capacities to understand what is happening when parents divorce. These children often try to cope with the divorce with anger and aggression (Rohrlich et al., 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976, 1980). Shame and rejection with peers may also develop and lead to social

withdrawal and low self-esteem (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Rosenberg, 1972). Fears and worries are common, as are loyalty conflicts between parents (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Rohrlich et al., 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976).

Adolescents who have recently experienced the divorce of their parents are often required to demonstrate greater maturity and responsibility (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). While these adolescents are trying to establish their own identity and autonomy from parents, they may prematurely lose their parental figures and the accompanying sanctions and security. Adolescents may be forced to rely on weak internal controls, leaving them vulnerable to their own sexual and aggressive impulses (Sorosky, 1977; Springer & Wallerstein, 1983). As a result, precocious and promiscuous sexual activity, particularly by adolescent girls is common (Hetherington, 1972; Lamb, 1977; Sorosky, 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Feelings of anger, anxieties concerning the future, and depression are also common, often resulting in sarcasm and detachment from the family (Hetherington, 1979; Sorosky, 1977; Toomin, 1974).

There are very few investigations of the effects of divorce on children above sixteen years of age. Given the importance of identity and intimacy issues to this age group, it would seem that the failure of a child's primary model of intimate relationships, his/her parents, could have a significant impact on the child's own resolution of intimacy issues. A few investigations have found that college students with divorced parents report a greater degree of anxiety, depression, and insecurity (Farber, Primavera, & Felner, 1983). Studies have also found that college students with divorced parents are not significantly different from students from intact families along dimensions of ego identity and sex-role development (Farber,

Primavera, & Felner, 1983; Grossman, Shea, & Adams, 1980).

The research on sex differences among children of divorce has found that the effects of divorce are more pervasive and enduring for school age boys (Hetherington, 1979, 1981; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). Boys tend to experience greater dependency, behavior disorders, immaturity, and negative affect (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978, 1979). In contrast, girls tend to exhibit more whining, complaining, attention seeking, and compliant behaviors (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). Girls from father-absent homes, as a result of divorce, also seek greater attention from men, leading to a high degree of sexual activity in adolescence (Hetherington, 1972).

Many studies regarding the effects of divorce seem to indicate a poor prognosis for children of divorce. However, two comprehensive longitudinal studies indicate that the negative effects of divorce on children are most intense in the first year following divorce, followed by a gradual return to adaptive, or pre-divorce, functioning in subsequent years (Hetherington et al., 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly 1976, 1980).

It is estimated that, of the total number of children of divorce, approximately 164,000 individuals were 18 years old or older (National Center for Health Statistics, 1973). The present study compared college students from intact and divorced families along multiple measures of psychological adjustment. Particular attention was paid to sex differences. Number of years since the parents' divorce was also considered.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 500 college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the Colorado State University. 49.6% of the sample was

male and 50.4% was female. Freshman and sophmores made up over 88% of the sample. The majority of the sample (67.6%) had parents that were married, while 25.8% of the sample had parents that were divorced. Over 83% of the subjects with divorced parents lived with their mother following the divorce.

Procedure

Subjects were group administered a series of paper and pencil questionnaires in October and November of 1986. Questionnaires were randomly ordered in survey packets and identified by subject number to maintain anonymity.

Measures

Measures included a demographic data sheet, a sexuality inventory, and a survey regarding attitudes toward marriage. Other dependent measures included the Psychological Screening Inventory (Lanyon, 1973), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Johnson, 1976; Rosenberg, 1965), and the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1967; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Moch, & Erbaugh, 1961).

Results

A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted on all dependent measures using a sex x parental marital status (divorced vs. married) factorial design. A significant sex x parental marital status interaction $F(8,306)=2.23$, $p < .05$, was obtained. Further analyses indicated that the Beck Depression Inventory was the only significant dependent measure contributing to this interaction, $F(1,313)=7.54$, $p < .01$. These results indicate that women with married parents are more depressed than men with married parents, though men are more depressed than women with divorced

parents. No significant main effects were found for gender or parental marital status. These results indicate that men and women do not differ greatly across the marital status of their parents. Men with divorced parents, however, seem to suffer significantly more depression than women with divorced parents.

A multivariate analysis of variance was also conducted using a sex x number of years since the divorce factorial design. Number of years since the divorce was divided into four cells; less than or equal to one year, two to five years, six to ten years, and greater than ten years. A significant sex x number of years since the divorce interaction $F(24,227) = 1.64$, $p < .05$, was obtained. Univariate analyses indicated that the PSI Expression scale was the dependent measure accounting for the significant multivariate interaction, $F(3,84) = 2.65$, $p = .054$. Further analyses were conducted to interpret the significant interaction. The analysis of variance, with post-hoc correction, indicated that women are significantly different, $F(3,60) = 2.92$, $p < .05$, in degree of expressiveness across number of years since the parental divorce, while men are not. The data suggest that women with parents divorced less than or equal to one year ago are significantly more expressive than women with parents that have been divorced for more than one year. No significant main effects were found for gender or number of years since parental divorce.

Discussion

The present study found that men experience more depression than women with parents that have divorced. This result supported the hypothesis that men and women differ in the degree of distress experienced following parental divorce. This sex difference has also been found in the

literature. There was also some evidence to support the hypothesis that men and women do differ in the number of years since their parents have divorced. College women that have experienced the divorce of their parents in the past year show a greater degree of expressiveness than women that have experienced their parents' divorce more than one year ago. This difference in expressiveness was not found for men.

The hypothesis indicating that college students from divorced families would have more negative attitudes toward marriage was not supported. This may be due to the lack of relatedness between parental divorce and marital attitudes, or it may be due to the measure used in the present study. The Marital Attitudes Survey was designed for this study and was found to have only mid-range reliability, α=0.5520. Perhaps a more reliable measure of marital attitudes would produce a different outcome. The hypothesis indicating that college women with divorced parents would exhibit greater sexual acting out, measured by number of sexual partners and age at first intercourse, was also not supported. This is curious, given the prior literature indicating the delayed effect of sexual promiscuity with girls of divorced parents. Perhaps the high degree of expressiveness exhibited in women with parents divorced within the past year may be related to a degree of flirtatiousness in heterosexual interactions, which has been supported in the literature (Hetherington, 1972; Lamb, 1977).

The present study hopes to provide a greater understanding of how college students are affected by their parents' divorce. In the past, researchers have ignored this age group. Hopefully, this study has provided some insight into this otherwise forgotten population and has created new questions to incite researchers to investigate this population within divorce research.

REFERENCES

Anthony, E. J. (1974). Children at risk from divorce: a review. In E. J. Anthony & C. Koupernik (Eds.), The Child in his Family (pp. 461-477). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Beck, A. T. (1967). Depression: Causes and treatment. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Beck, A. T., Ward, C. H., Mendelson, M., Moch, J., & Erbaugh, J. (1961). An inventory for measuring depression. Archives of General Psychiatry, 4, 561-571.

Bentler, P. M. (1968). Heterosexual behavior assessment-I, II. Behavior Research and Therapy, 6, 21-30.

Berg, B. & Kelly, R. (1979). The measured self-esteem of children from broken, rejected, and accepted families. Journal of Divorce, 2(4), 363-369.

Blaine, G. B., Jr. (1969). The effect of divorce upon the personality development of children and youth. In E. A. Grollman (Ed.), Explaining Divorce to Children (pp. 76-85). Boston: Beacon Press.

Chess, S., Thomas, A., Korn, S., Mittelman, M., & Cohen, J. (1983). Early parental attitudes, divorce and separation, and young adult outcome: findings of a longitudinal study. Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, 22(1), 47-51.

Desimone-Luis, J., O'Mahoney, K., & Hunt, D. (1979). Children of separation and divorce: factors influencing adjustment. Journal of Divorce, 3(1), 37-42.

Despert, J. L. (1962). Children of Divorce. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Emery, R. E. (1982). Interparental conflict and the children of discord and divorce. Psychological Bulletin, 92, 310-330.

Emery, R. E., Hetherington, E. M., & Dilalla, L. F. (1984). Divorce, children, and social policy. In H. W. Stevenson & A. E. Siegel (Eds.), Child Development Research and Social Policy. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). Identity, Youth, and Crisis, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Farber, S. S., Primavera, J., & Felner, R. D. (1983). Older adolescents and parental divorce: adjustment problems and mediators of coping. Journal of Divorce, 7(2), 59-75.

Gardner, R. A. (1974). Psychological aspects of divore. In S. Arieti (Ed.), American Handbook of Psychiatry (Vol. 1, 2nd ed.), (pp.496-512). New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Grossman, S. M., Shea, J. A., & Adams, G. R. (1980). Effects of parental

divorce during early childhood on ego development and identity formation of college students. Journal of Divorce, 3(3), 263-272.

Guidubaldi, J., Perry, J. D., Cleminshaw, H. K., & McLoughlin, C. S. (1983). The impact of parental divorce on children: report of the nationwide NASP study. School Psychology Review, 12(3), 300-323.

Hess, R. D. & Camara, K. A. (1979). Post-divorce family relationships as mediating factors in the consequences of divorce for children. Journal of Social Issues, 35(4), 79-96.

Hetherington, E. M. (1972). Effects of father absence on personality development in adolescent daughters. Developmental Psychology, 7(3), 313-326.

Hetherington, E. M. (1979). Divorce: a child's perspective. American Psychologist, 34(10), 851-858.

Hetherington, E. M. (1979). Family interaction and the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children after divorce. In V. C. Vaughan & T. B. Brazelton (Eds.), The Family: Setting Priorities (pp. 71-88). New York: Science and Medicine Publishing Co., Inc.

Hetherington, E. M. (1981). Children and divorce. In R. W. Henderson (Ed.), Parent-Child Interaction: Theory, research, and prospects (pp. 38-58). New York: Academic Press, Inc.

Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1978). The aftermath of divorce. In J. H. Stevens & M. Mathews (Eds.), Mother-Child Father-Child Relations, (pp. 149-176). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1979). Play and social interaction in children following divorce. Journal of Social Issues, 35(4), 26-49.

Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1982). Effects of divorce on parents and children. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), Non-Traditional Families: Parenting and Child Development (pp. 233-288). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associated, Inc.

Hodges, W. F. & Bloom, B. L. (1984). Parent's report of children's adjustment to marital separation: a longitudinal study. Journal of Divorce, 8(1), 33-50.

Johnson, O. G. (1976). Tests and Measurements in Child Development: Handbook II (Vol. 2, pp. 727-728). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Johnson, P. L. & O'Leary, D. (in press). Relationships between parental behavior patterns and aggression in girls. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology.

Kanoy, K. W. & Cunningham, J. L. (1984). Consensus or confusion in research on children and divorce: conceptual and methodological issues. Journal of Divorce, 7(4), 45-71.

Kelly, R. & Berg, B. (1978). Measuring children's reactions to divorce. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 34(1), 215-221.

Kelly, J. B. & Wallerstein, J. S. (1976). Effects of parental divorce-early latency. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 46(1), 20-32.

Kelly, J. B. & Wallerstein, J. S. (1976). Effects of parental divorce-later latency. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 46(1), 256-269.

Kulka, R. A. & Weingarten, H. (1979). The long-term effects of parental divorce in childhood on adult adjustment. Journal of Social Issues, 35(4), 50-77.

Kurdek, L. A. (1981). An integrative perspective on children's divorce adjustment. American Psychologist, 36(8), 856-866.

Kurdek, L. A. & Berg, B. (1983). Correlates of children's adjustment to their parents' divorces. In L. A. Kurdek (Ed.), Children of Divorce (pp. 47-60). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Kurdek, L. A. & Siesky, A. E., Jr. (1980). Children's perceptions of their parents' divorce. Journal of Divorce, 3(4), 339-378.

Kurdek, L. A. & Siesky, A. E., Jr. (1980). The effects of divorce on children: the relationship between parent and child perspectives. Journal of Divorce, 4(2), 85-99.

Lamb, M. E. (1977). The effects of divorce on children's personality development. Journal of Divorce, 1(2), 163-174.

Landis, J.T. (1960). The trauma of children when parents divorce. Marriage and Family Living, 22, 7-13.

Landis, J. T. (1962). A comparison of children from divorced and nondivorced unhappy marriages. The Family Life Coordinator, 11(3), 61-65.

Lanyon, R. I. (1973). Psychological Screening Inventory Manual. Goshen, NY: Research Psychologists Press.

Levitin, T. E. (1979). Children of divorce: an introduction. Journal of Social Issues, 35(4), 1-25.

Lowenstein, J. S. & Koopman, E. J. (1978). A comparison of the self-esteem between boys living with single-parent mothers and single-parent fathers. Journal of Divorce, 2(2), 195-208.

McDermott, J.F., Jr. (1968). Parental divorce in early childhood. American Journal of Psychiatry, 124(10), 1424-1432.

National Center for Health Statistics. (1973). Divorces: Analysis of changes, United States, 1968. In Vital and Health Statistics (Series 21, No. 22). Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office.

Nye, F. I. (1957). Child adjustment in broken and in unhappy unbroken homes. Marriage and Family Living, 19(4), 356-361.

Offord, D. R., Abrams, N., Allen, N., & Poushinsky, M. (1979). Broken homes, parental psychiatric illness, and female delinquency. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 49(2), 252-264.

Reinhard, D. W. (1977). The reaction of adolescent boys and girls to the divorce of their parents. Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 6(2), 21-23.

Reiss, I. L. (1967). The Social Context of Premarital Sexual Permissiveness. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Rohrlich, R., Berg-Cross, L., & Berg-Cross, G. (1977). The effects of divorce: a research review with a developmental perspective. Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 6(2), 15-20.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). Society and the Adolescent Self-Esteem. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rosenberg, M. (1972). The broken family and self-esteem. In I. L. Reiss (Ed.), Readings on the Family System (pp. 518-530). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Rutter, M. (1970). Sex differences in children's response to family stress. In E. J. Anthony & C. Koupernik (Eds.), The Child in his Family (Vol. 1, pp. 165-196). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Rutter, M. (1971). Parent-child separation: psychological effects on the children. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 12, 233-260.

Santrock, J. W. & Warshak, R. A. (1979). Father custody and social development in boys and girls. Journal of Social Issues, 35(4), 112-125.

Schoettle, U. C. & Cantwell, D. P. (1980). Children of divorce: demographic variables, symptoms, and diagnoses. American Academy of Child Psychiatry, 19, 453-475.

Sorosky, A. D. (1977). The psychological effects of divorce on adolescents. Adolescence, 12, 123-136.

Springer, C. & Wallerstein, J. S. (1983). Young adolescents' responses to their parents' divorces. In L. A. Kurdek (Ed.), Children and Divorce (pp. 15-27). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Thornton, A. & Freedman, D. (1983). The changing American family. Population Bulletin, 38(4), 3-43.

Toonin, M. K. (1974). The child of divorce. In J.C. Cull & R. E. Hardy (Eds.), Therapeutic Needs of the Family (pp.56-90). Springfield, Ill: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher.

U. S. Bureau of the Census. (1984). Marital status and living

arrangements: March 1984. Current Population Reports (Series P-20, No. 399). Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office.

U. S. Bureau of the Census. (1985). Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986 (106th edition). Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office.

Vess, J. D., Jr., Schwebel, A. I. & Moreland, J. (1983). The effects of early parental divorce on the sex role development of college students. Journal of Divorce, 7(1), 83-95.

Wallerstein, J. S. & Kelly, J. B. (1974). The effects of parental divorce: the adolescent experience. In E. J. Anthony & C. Koupernik (Eds.), The Child in his Family (pp. 479-505). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Wallerstein, J. S. & Kelly, J. B. (1976). The effects of parental divorce: experiences of the child in later latency. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 46(2), 256-269.

Wallerstein, J. S. & Kelly, J. B. (1980). Surviving the Breakup: How children and parents cope with divorce. New York: Basic Books, Inc.